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Candidates engage in race to the bottom on trade policy

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You wouldn't know it from listening to this year's crop of presidential candidates, but global trade unquestionably makes most Americans better off.

It supports high-paying jobs at companies such as Monsanto and Caterpillar. It allows U.S. farmers to feed the world. It provides consumers bargains on everything from clothing to smartphones.

For 70 years, the U.S. has led by example, opening our own market and persuading others to do the same. Now, the aspirants to this country's highest office want to put the brakes on globalization.

On the Democratic side, Bernie Sanders calls trade policy "a disaster for the American worker." Hillary Clinton once had solid free-trade credentials but joined Sanders during the debates in criticizing the Trans-Pacific Partnership, saying it doesn't help workers enough.

Republican candidate Ted Cruz has made a similar about-face on TPP. He once favored it, but now he doesn't. One of his opponents, John Kasich, remains pro-TPP.

Then there's Donald Trump, whose anti-trade policies might be retrograde enough for a global recession. Trump has promised to impose a 45 percent tariff on goods imported from China and has threatened Ford with a 35 percent tax on cars made in Mexico.

These proposals would violate the rules of the World Trade Organization. They would invite retaliation against some of America's successful exports, such as farm products.

And they come from a businessman who certainly knows the benefits of the trading system: His Trump-branded line of men's clothing included ties made in China and shirts made in Bangladesh.

Polls taken by [Pew Research](#) and [Gallup](#) in 2014 and 2015, before the presidential campaign heated up, found a majority of Americans supportive of trade. Most of the candidates, though, think protectionist rhetoric will win them votes.

“They are throwing out bogeyman caricatures to stoke the fear that voters feel about everything from globalization to ISIS,” says Jerry Jasinowski, an economist and former president of the National Association of Manufacturers. “Maybe reality TV has influenced political discourse to a greater degree than we realize.”

Indeed, Trump’s language on trade could come straight from a show like his “The Apprentice.” He says China and Japan “beat us all the time,” and compares the U.S. trade deficit to a company that loses money every year.

In fact, trade creates more winners than losers. U.S. consumers and Bangladeshi workers both benefited from the sale of Trump’s shirts.

It’s wrongheaded to see exports as good and imports as bad, and one explanation for our trade deficit is that foreigners find the U.S. a consistently attractive place to invest. They buy our shares and Treasury bills; we use the money to buy their T-shirts.

“Trade is not a scoreboard,” says K. William Watson, a trade policy analyst at the Cato Institute. “Whenever we trade, we’re all getting richer.”

It’s possible that whoever wins will tone down the protectionist rhetoric once in office. Congress might even approve the TPP in a November lame-duck session, handing Barack Obama one last victory and avoiding a major loss of face with 11 trading partners.

Maybe President Cruz or President Clinton would return to their former free-trade inclinations, implementing the TPP and pushing for a similar deal with Europe. Maybe President Trump would remember the lessons of business and step back from a trade war.

We can hope, can’t we? Still, it would be nice to have candidates speaking about trade like world leaders rather than pandering for votes like reality-show contestants.